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ABSTRACT

This paper presents tips on scripting, staging, and reading Reader's Theater. The first section of the paper discusses tips on scripting--script roles, cuts and changes, narration, script format, and team scripting (children working in teams to write scripts). The second section presents tips on staging, such as equipment, script handling, the set, reader movement, mime, focus, and beginnings and endings. The third section presents tips on preparing, rehearsing, and performing reader's theater. Contains four figures. (RS)

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ED 413 623

Readers on Stage
Tips for Reader's Theater

By Aaron Shepard

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Reader's theater is often defined by what it is not -- no memorizing, no props, no costumes, no sets. All this makes reader's theater wonderfully convenient. Still, convenience is not its chief asset.

Like storytelling, reader's theater can create images by suggestion that could never be portrayed realistically on stage. Space and time can be shrunk or stretched, fantastic worlds can be created, marvelous journeys can be enacted. Reader's theater frees the performers and the audience from the physical limitations of conventional theater, letting the imagination soar.

Enjoy the magic of reader's theater!

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Tips on Scripting

This is part of *Readers On Stage: Tips for Reader's Theater*, by Aaron Shepard, found on the World Wide Web on Aaron's RT Page.

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Script Roles
Cuts and Changes
Narration
Script Format
Team Scripting

Almost any story can be scripted for reader's theater, but some are easier and work better than others. In general, look for stories that are simple and lively, with lots of dialog or action, and with not too many scenes or characters.

Script Roles

First study your chosen story to identify the roles. There are two basic types: *Narrators* tell the story. *Characters* are *in* the story. (In first-person stories, of course, the narrator is also a character.) To help your readers understand the types, you can explain that character parts appear in the story *inside* quotation marks, while narrator parts appear *outside*.

If the group you're working with is small, a story may have more roles than you have readers. In some such cases, a story may simply not be practical for you. But there are often ways to adjust:

- Assign to individual readers more than one role. But make sure a reader isn't onstage with more than one role at a time!
- "Cut" a character, or combine it with another. Speeches of one character can often be added to those of another.
- Use *character narration* in place of a separate narrator. With this approach, characters read the narrator parts that refer to themselves or that reflect their own point of view. This takes some getting used to, though, and often feels clumsy and unnatural.

Instead of too few readers, you may have more than you need. Here are some ways to involve more of them:

them:

- Use two or more narrators. This is usually a good idea anyway for young readers. See below for tips on splitting narration.
- Split characters into two or more. A character can sometimes be converted into a set of characters, with the speaking parts divided among them.
- Assign silent characters. Often stories have minor characters without speaking parts. If your directing style includes stage movement, you can assign these roles to surplus readers. You might also add speeches for them. Crowd scenes can always use extra readers.

Cuts and Changes

Feel free to make cuts and changes in the story that will make your script livelier, simpler to understand, or easier to perform. But be sure to read through and check whether everything in the story still makes sense.

Some authorities on reader's theater object to even the most minor changes in the author's work. But the author was not writing for performance. If you refrain from making appropriate changes, the author's work may not appear in its best light.

Here are some things you may want to "cut":

- Tag lines. These are the lines that tell us "he said" or "she said." In performance, these seldom do more than break up the flow of the story and trip up the readers. But leave in the ones that give extra information the audience must hear. Also leave in ones that an author has used to build rhythm.
- Long descriptions. Many stories include long sections of narration that slow the action. These can often be shortened or even removed.
- Minor characters or scenes. Cutting these can simplify the stage action and/or adjust for a small number of readers. Often, important dialog or information can be shifted to another character or scene.

Here are other areas where you might make changes:

- Character splitting or combining. As mentioned earlier, you can combine two or more similar characters into one, or split one into two or more.
- Additional speeches. Some story characters may have no lines, or may be onstage for a long time before they speak. In these cases, you may want to invent brief speeches for them. Also, if the narration tells *about* what a character said, you might convert this into a speech of the character.
- Stage directions. You can often make the script smoother by converting parts of the narration to stage directions for the characters.
- Difficult or obscure language. Though readers should be encouraged to read "up" from their level,

- Difficult or obscure language. Though readers should be encouraged to read "up" from their level, some scripts will be much easier to follow -- for both readers and audience -- if you now and then substitute a simpler word, or split a sentence in two. With foreign stories, you may want to "translate" unfamiliar terms.

- Sexist or demeaning language. Often this can be changed unobtrusively. If not, the story may not be appropriate for young people.

- Aids to reading. You can underline or italicize words that should be stressed, add commas to delineate phrasing, or insert stage directions to indicate the feeling behind speeches.

Narration

In scripts for younger readers, it's usually best to have two or more narrators. Besides creating extra roles, it spreads the responsibility for this very important function. It also helps retain audience interest during long narrative passages.

Splitting the narration can be done as simply or as artfully as you like. The way that is best often depends on how the story was written. Here are some possibilities:

- With two narrators, assign them alternate paragraphs and/or half-paragraphs. It is best to adjust paragraph splits so Narrator 1 begins each new scene. This limits the reassignments made necessary by later script changes, such as adding or removing a single narrator speech.

- Switch to a different narrator with each new scene.

- With two narrators, "bounce" back and forth between them in a way that reflects an author's strong rhythmic structure. This can mean trading off on sentences, or even on phrases.

- "Sandwich" the dialog. One narrator speaks both before and after a section of character dialog. Then the next narrator does the same.

- Assign a narrator to each character. Each narrator reads all the lines that refer to their assigned character or that reflect their character's point of view.

- Divide narration between the narrators and the characters themselves. This form of character narration works best if the characters don't actually mention themselves.

Script Format

Scripts should be neat and easy to read. Readers are supposed to look up often from their scripts, and they will have trouble finding their place again if the page is too crammed with text -- *or* if the text is too spread out.

- **Figure 1A. Sample first page** (11K)

- **Figure 1B. Sample second page** (10K)

I recommend the following format:

- Large, readable type. On a Mac, I recommend 12-point Geneva. For a smaller font like Times, Helvetica, or Arial, 14-point is best. The initial documentation can be in a smaller size to save space.
- Linespacing set at 1-1/2 (halfway between single spacing and double spacing). The initial documentation can be single-spaced.
- Left margin, 1-1/2 inches. (This is extra-wide to allow for binding and to let readers add stage directions). Right margin, 1 inch. Top margin, 1 inch, including the header. Bottom margin, 1/2 inch or more.
- A right-hand header with one or two key words from the script title, plus the page number.
- Block paragraph format -- no indent, either regular or hanging. A blank line after each speech.
- Lines flush left -- not "justified" at the right margin but left uneven.
- No splitting of speeches -- or at least of paragraphs -- between one page and the next. Your word processor may let you "protect" paragraphs or marked blocks against splitting, or let you "keep lines together," either case by case or as a paragraph "style." If not, you can insert a page break above any speech that would be split.

Team Scripting

Children working in teams are easily capable of scripting short, simple stories. Here is one approach:

First explain briefly about identifying types of roles, adjusting for more or fewer readers, and possible cutting. Divide the readers into teams of about four. Assign a one-page story to each team, with each member receiving a copy. (Fables work well.)

The team members read through their story, identify the roles, and divide the roles among themselves. Then they decide who will read what. Each reader underlines his or her own speaking parts -- in pencil, to allow changes -- and also crosses out anything the whole team agrees to cut. If you wish, these individual copies can later be compiled into a master script in standard format.

Normally, young readers can have a one-page story ready for tryout in about a quarter hour, with practically no adult help. *With* adult help, it can take quite a bit longer.

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Tips on Staging

This is part of *Readers On Stage: Tips for Reader's Theater*, by Aaron Shepard, found on the World Wide Web on Aaron's RT Page.

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Introduction
Equipment
Script Handling
The "Set"
Reader Movement
Mime
Focus
Beginnings and Endings

There are many styles of reader's theater. In the most traditional style:

- Readers are arranged in a row or semicircle, sitting on high stools or standing.
- Scripts are often set on music stands.
- Readers look straight out toward the audience or at an angle, rather than looking at each other.

The group I performed with, though, employed a style quite different, designed to appeal to young audiences. Chamber Readers is a nonprofit reader's theater company in Humboldt County, California, promoting reading and literature since 1975. Two teams, each with four readers, are directed by Jean Wagner, one of the founding members. Chamber Readers performs each year in nearly every public school in the county and is considered a local institution.

Like traditional reader's theater, the Chamber Readers style is based on script reading and the suggestive power of language. But it adds a good deal of mime and movement as well. That's a bit more work, but it can be more fun too!

Briefly, the distinctive features of the Chamber Readers approach are:

- Characters move around the stage much as in a play, acting out or suggesting the movements described in the story, often by simple mime devices like walking in place.
- Though narrators look at the audience, characters most often look at each other.

- Scripts in sturdy binders are held in one hand, leaving the other hand free for gesturing.
- A set of low stools and a single high stool serve as versatile stage scenery/props.

The following tips on staging are based on the Chamber Reader style. But remember, these are suggestions only. I hope you'll feel free to use or develop whatever style will be most enjoyable to you and your readers. (For more details on the traditional approach, see Caroline Feller Bauer's *Presenting Reader's Theater*, H.W. Wilson, 1987.)

The word *stage* here means "stage area" -- which could be the front of a classroom. An actual stage isn't needed.

Equipment

For reader's theater, you really need nothing but scripts. But a little basic equipment can add a lot. Here are some suggestions:

- **Script binders.** Sturdy ring binders are best. Whatever you use, make sure the pages turn easily. On stage, the binder may also become a prop, representing a book, a notepad, the surface of a table.
- **Smocks.** These give the readers a team look, yet are also neutral -- so readers can easily change character in the minds of the audience. The smock can be a simple rectangle of cloth with a headhole, fastened together at the sides.
- **Chair-height stools.** These are your most useful props. For some stories, you won't need any; for others, you may need one for each reader on stage. *They must be solid enough to stand on!*
- **High stools.** One or two should be enough. These too should be solid enough for standing.
- **Portable screens.** These are strictly optional, but they're fun to use if they're handy. They provide an alternative for entrances and exits and for some special effects.
- **Small props.** These can sometimes add nice touches -- as when a Pied Piper has a tin whistle to play.

Script Handling

The trick with scripts is to handle them so they can be referred to easily but don't seriously restrict movement or distract the audience. The script is held by one hand only, leaving the other hand free for acting. For a relaxed grip, the binder spine can simply lie in the palm. If readers are moving around a lot, they can instead grip the binder's top edge. Part of the binder rests against the upturned forearm.

Right-handers hold a script with their left hand, left-handers with their right. But sometimes a reader may have to switch hands, if a particular hand is needed for stage action, or if looking at the script turns the reader too far from the audience.

reader too far from the audience.

Though readers don't need to memorize, they should know their lines and cues well enough so they can look up from their scripts about half the time. When they *do* look down, it's only with the eyes, keeping the head straight up.

You will have to be flexible about script handling. A character who has to look upward for much of a scene may have to memorize part of the script. A narrator who has a long speech may have to run a free hand along the edge to keep the place. A reader who will have no free hand when a page must be turned can place that page backward in the binder to get two pages facing.

The "Set"

You don't *construct* sets for reader's theater -- but you can *suggest* them. The narrator's descriptions are brought to life by the readers' movements and mime. If a reader opens a door, we see it. If readers hang ornaments on a Christmas tree, we know right where it is.

Stools are among your chief aids for suggesting sets, as well as being practical props. Three short stools in a semicircle can be a dining room. Two short stools close by each other can be a bench in a park, or a roof ridge atop a house. A single high stool can be a throne room. A high stool with a short stool next to it can be a tree to climb, or a mountain. An area with no stools can be anything at all!

As in theater, you start designing your "set" by figuring out what locations your script calls for. Then you position those locations on your stage in whatever arrangement works and looks best. Look for ease of reader movement, stage balance, and openness to the audience.

Readers can move to different stage areas for different scenes. Or they can stay in the same area and you can "change the set." Or the set can move to them! For instance, a reader could move from room to room in a house just by walking in place, climbing some stairs, and opening some doors -- all without moving an inch.

Reader Movement

After designing your "set," decide where your readers will start and where they will go. Don't forget the narrators.

Drawing a series of movement diagrams can help you spot problems, save time during rehearsal, and jog your memory the next time you use the script. In one simple diagram system, circles are low stools, double circles are high stools, crosses are readers, and arrows show movement.

- **Figure 2. Sample movement diagrams** (6K)

To go "offstage," a reader doesn't need to actually leave the area but can instead go *BTA* -- "back to audience." This indicates to the audience that the reader is out of the picture. If sitting on a stool, the reader can usually just turn around on it. If standing, the reader should also get out of the way by moving toward the back of the stage. Narrators seldom go BTA, even if they're not reading for awhile.

toward the back of the stage. Narrators seldom go BTA, even if they're not reading for awhile.

In regular theater, the curtain or the lights coming down indicates a "scene change" -- a jump in time and/or place. In reader's theater, this change is shown by some kind of break in movement. For instance, the readers can all "freeze" in place like statues. Or they can turn BTA, freeze, then come back in. Or they can freeze, then cross the stage for the next scene. If one scene in the story flows smoothly into the next, without a jump, you may not need a break at all.

Mime and Sound Effects

Whatever action is described in the script, readers should try either to do it or else to suggest it through mime. If someone is eating, we should see the fork carried to the mouth. If someone is hanging in the air, we should see the arm pulled tight by the floating balloon. If someone is racing a horse, we should see the galloping hooves.

The key word here is "suggest," because the movements are often far from realistic. For instance, it's hard to take off a coat realistically when one hand holds a script. Readers quickly learn to sleep sitting up, with their heads bent to the side. And walking in place is a reader's favorite mode of travel.

Though formal mime techniques aren't required, they do add polish to a performance. It's always good to draw on proven tricks for walking in place, climbing up or down stairs or ropes or ladders, lifting or pulling heavy objects, flying, falling, and so on. Look for library books on mime, or invite a local mime to conduct a workshop.

Part of successful group mime is being aware of the invisible. If a stool is meant to be a chair at a table, make sure no one walks through the table! Even a door that's invisible shouldn't shift position as different people pass through it. If two characters look at a picture on the wall, they will hopefully agree where it is!

Sounds in the story too should be added where possible -- explosions, wind, bees, roosters, whatever. To help the illusion, this is usually handled by readers who are BTA.

Focus

Focus refers to where the readers are looking. Most of the time, it's simple: Narrators use *audience focus* -- they look straight at the audience. Characters use *on-stage focus* -- they look at whoever they're talking to, just as in plays or real life.

But sometimes you may want characters to use *off-stage focus.* The readers imagine a screen facing them, as wide as the stage, set up at the front edge of the audience. On this screen they imagine a mirror image of all the readers. Then instead of talking straight to each other, they talk to each other's image. If you prefer, you can "move" the screen farther from the readers.

- **Figure 3. Offstage focus** (1K)

The most important use of off-stage focus is to help create illusions of distance or height. Two characters

on the same stage but using off-stage focus can shout and wave at each other as if a mile apart. If one looks upward and one looks downward, you have a midget talking to a giant, or a woman in a window talking to a man in the street.

Characters can at times also use audience focus, addressing comments directly to the audience. They might also use this focus if the audience is drawn into the story -- as might happen, for instance, if the audience suddenly becomes a hill completely covered with cats.

Beginnings and Endings

One reader should introduce the story with at least the title and the author. Beyond that, something can be said about the story, about the author, or about the performance. Just don't give away the plot!

After the introduction, the readers wait to begin until they're all in place and frozen and the audience is quiet.

At the end, the last words are spoken slowly and with rhythm, so the audience knows the story is over. Everyone recognizes the ending "*hap*-pily *ev*-er *af*-ter." But the same effect can be achieved with almost any words by reading them in a "slow three."

When the story is finished, the readers freeze for a long moment to break the action. Then they close their scripts, face the audience, and bow all together. You may want to assign one reader to lead this closing sequence.

Beginnings and endings should be rehearsed along with the story so they'll go smoothly.

Once young people have a general idea of how reader's theater works, they can take over much of the staging themselves. In fact, they often beat adults at developing mime. After all, pretending is part of their profession.

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Tips on Reading

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Preparing
Rehearsing
Performing

Mumble, mumble,
Stop and stumble.
Pages turn
And readers fumble.

If this sounds like a description of your reader's theater attempts, try giving your readers the following tips.

Preparing

First, here are instructions your readers can follow -- individually or in a group -- to prepare their scripts and get familiar with their parts.

- Highlight your speeches in your copy of the script. Mark only words you will *speak* -- not role tags or stage directions. (Yellow non-fluorescent marker is best.)
- Underline words that tell about anything you'll need to act out -- words in either the stage directions or *other* readers' speeches. If you're given extra stage directions later, write them in the margin with pencil.
- Read through your part silently. If there are words you're not sure of, look them up in a dictionary. If there are words you must remember to stress, underline them. If there are places you'll need to pause, mark them with a couple of slashes, //. (For instance, you may have to pause so the audience will know there's a change of scene or time in the story.)
- Read through your part out loud. If you're a character, think about how that character would sound. Should you try a funny voice? How would the character feel about what's happening in the

story? Can you speak as if you were feeling that?

- Get up and read through the script again, trying out faces and actions. Would your character stand or move a special way? Can you do that? If possible, do all this in front of a mirror.

Even before you give your readers their scripts, you can help them by reading to them the script or its source story. Effective modeling will give them a head start against any difficulties. You may also want to discuss the difference between characters and narrators. ("In the story, character parts are *inside* the quotation marks, and narrator parts are *outside*.")

Rehearsing

Here are pointers your readers should remember both in rehearsal and performance.

- Hold your script at a steady height, but make sure it doesn't hide your face. If there's anyone in the audience you can't see, your script is too high.
- While you speak, try to look up often, not just at your script. When you do look at it, move just your eyes and keep your head up.
- Talk slowly. Speak each syllable clearly.
- Talk loud! You have to be heard by the little old deaf lady in the back row.
- Talk with feeling. Audiences love a ham!
- Stand and sit straight. Keep your hands and feet still, if they're doing nothing useful!
- If you're moving around, face the audience as much as you can. When rehearsing, always think about where the audience will be.
- Characters, remember to *be* your character even when you're not speaking.
- Narrators, make sure you give the characters enough time for their actions.

To help your readers get full vocal power, have them check their breathing by placing their hands on their stomachs and inhaling. If they're breathing fully, their hands will go *out*. (The diaphragm muscle pushes down on the stomach to let the lower lungs expand.) If their hands go *in*, it means they're breathing with only their upper lungs.

To help your readers hold themselves straight, ask them to imagine a string tied to their chest, pulling up. Tongue twisters and other vocal exercises can help them speak more clearly. In fact, you may want to warm up your readers with vocal exercises and stretches before your rehearsals and performances.

Performing

Before an actual performance, discuss with your readers the "what-ifs."

- If the audience laughs, stop speaking until they can hear you again.
- If someone talks in the audience, don't pay attention.
- If someone walks into the room, don't look.
- If you make a mistake, pretend it was right.
- If you drop something, try to leave it at least till the audience is looking somewhere else.
- If a reader forgets to read, see if you can read their part instead, or make something up, or maybe just skip over it. But *don't* whisper to the reader!
- If a reader falls on their rear end, pretend they didn't.

Finally, a couple of reminders for the director: Have fun, and tell your readers what they're doing well!

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Figure 1A. Sample first page
(To print this image on a Mac, first use "Page Setup" to reduce to 75%.)

Savitri

A Tale of Ancient India

Retold by Aaron Shepard

A script for reader's theater, adapted by the author from *Savitri: A Tale of Ancient India*, retold by Aaron Shepard, illustrated by Vera Rosenberry, Whitman, Morton Grove, Illinois, 1992. Copyright © 1992 Aaron Shepard. This script may be copied for any educational, noncommercial purpose.

10 min.

ROLES: Narrator 1, Narrator 2, Savitri, Satyavan, King 1, King 2, Teacher, Narada, Yama, Goddess

NOTE: This story is probably around 3000 years old. It was first written down about 2000 years ago as part of the *Mahabharata*, India's great national epic. *Savitri* is pronounced "SAH-vi-tree." *Satyavan* is pronounced "SOT-yuh-von." *Narada* is pronounced "NAH-ruh-duh." *Yama* is pronounced "YAH-muh." *Mahabharata* is pronounced "MAH-hah-BAH-ruh-tuh."

NARRATOR 1: In India, in the time of legend, there lived a king with many wives but not one child. Morning and evening for eighteen years, he faced the fire on the sacred altar and prayed for the gift of children.

NARRATOR 2: Finally, a shining goddess rose from the flames.

GODDESS: I am Savitri, child of the Sun. By your prayers, you have won a daughter.

NARRATOR 1: Within a year, a daughter came to the king and his favorite wife. He named her Savitri, after the goddess.

NARRATOR 2: Beauty and intelligence were the princess Savitri's, and eyes that shone like the sun. So splendid was she, people thought she herself was a goddess. Yet when the time came for her to marry, no man asked for her. Her father told her,

☐ Sample Second Page

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Figure 1B. Sample second page
(To print this image on a Mac, first use "Page Setup" to reduce to 75%.)

KING 1: Weak men turn away from radiance like yours. Go out and find a man worthy of you. Then I will arrange the marriage.

NARRATOR 1: In the company of servants and councilors, Savitri traveled from place to place. After many days, she came upon a hermitage by a river crossing. Here lived many who had left the towns and cities for a life of prayer and study.

NARRATOR 2: Savitri entered the hall of worship and bowed to the eldest teacher. As they spoke, a young man with shining eyes came into the hall. He guided another man, old and blind.

SAVITRI: *(softly, to the teacher)* Who is that young man?

TEACHER: *(smiling)* That is Prince Satyavan. He guides his father, a king whose realm was conquered. It is well that Satyavan's name means "Son of Truth," for no man is richer in virtue.

NARRATOR 1: When Savitri returned home, she found her father with the holy seer called Narada.

KING 1: Daughter, have you found a man you wish to marry?

SAVITRI: Yes, father. His name is Satyavan.

NARADA: *(gasps)* Not Satyavan! Princess, no man could be more worthy, but you must not marry him! I know the future. Satyavan will die, one year from today!

KING 1: Do you hear, daughter? Choose a different husband!

NARRATOR 2: Savitri trembled but said,

SAVITRI: I have chosen Satyavan, and I will not choose another. However long or short his life, I wish to share it.

☐ Return to Text

Figure 2. Sample movement diagrams
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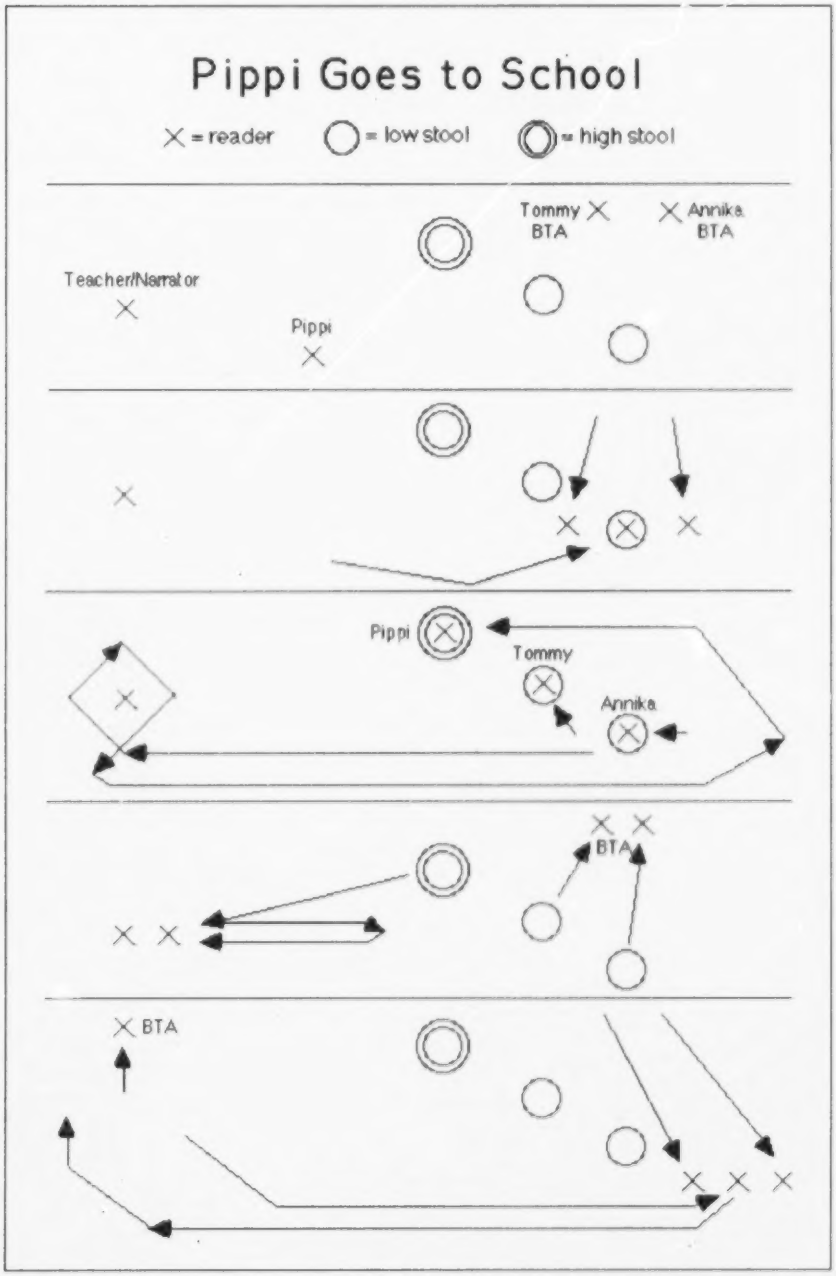

Return to Text

Figure 3. Offstage focus

Return to Text

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